

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH COLONEL THOMAS MCGRATH, U.S. ARMY, COMMANDER, REGIONAL SECURITY INTEGRATION COMMAND-SOUTH, VIA TELECONFERENCE FROM AFGHANISTAN SUBJECT: ONGOING OPERATIONS SINCE THE RECENT KANDAHAR PRISON BREAK MODERATOR: JENNIFER CRAGG TIME: 12:31 P.M. EDT DATE: MONDAY, JUNE 23, 2008

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COL. MCGRATH: Good morning, or good evening. It's Tom McGrath, and I just want to thank everybody for inviting me back to the Bloggers Roundtable, so I can talk to you today.

I'm the commander of the Afghan Regional Security Integration Command for southern Afghanistan, which is down here. I'm posted at the Kandahar Airfield. It's my fourth time speaking with you guys, and I recognize a lot of the names out there. And thanks again for letting me talk.

I'm sure you're all aware of the Kandahar prison break, Sarposa Prison, which occurred over a week ago, in the evening on the -- of the 13th. In an effort to provide some background -- the Taliban attacked the prison in a commando raid, which began with a suicide truck bomber blowing up a -- blowing up at the main gate in downtown Kandahar. Other Taliban terrorists followed with rocket-propelled grenades and machine gun fire.

And were forced, some of them -- the prisoners' cells were already open. They were able to leave mostly on foot. Some reports they were on vehicles and buses. I didn't see anything like that, and I don't they're that organized to pull that off. Most of them will move by foot.

On the events that followed, which was very successful, called Operation Dawad Backhoum (ph), proceeded very well and everything fell into schedule. Afghan security forces deployed very quickly and in significant numbers. Additionally, members of my embedded team, trainers and police mentor teams joined them in the operation to provide the proper mentoring and assisting in enablers.

It was evident that the Afghan national security forces were in the lead. And the number of Taliban on the ground was very exaggerated by a lot of reports, however we were able to attack them and defeat them decisively.

They moved up into -- a lot of them seemed to have massed up in Arghandab, which is just to the north-northwest of Kandahar city.

(Beeping sound.)

That must be someone else.

Q Hi, Jennifer. It's Christy (ph).

MS. CRAGG: Okay. Go ahead and continue, sir.

COL. MCGRATH: Okay.

We moved into Arghandab with the Afghan national army. The locals were very happy to see our soldiers -- see their soldiers, excuse me -- there, and invited them in to eat, have dinner, and hoped that they were staying for a longer period of time. They were very happy they were there, thanked them for their hard work in ridding the town on the Taliban and -- excuse me, going to rid the town of the Taliban. So clearly -- pretty clear the locals want the Taliban out and they want the Afghan national government to be able to survive.

And the ANFF (sp) did quite well. It was very strategic in the move. President Karzai, along with the chief of staff of the army, very quickly deployed thousands of Afghan troops, using air and ground, into Kandahar city and into Arghandab to not only defeat the enemy forces, but to bring security to Kandahar city and also bring a sense of calm. The first night people were obviously very nervous, very worried. They had pretty much stayed in the houses at night, lights were off, the bars were closed. But as soon as the troops were there, within 24 hours there was still some nervousness and anxiety, but the people were pretty calm and music was being played, shops were being opened and life was carrying on somewhat normal.

The operations that went on in the Arghandab were extremely successful also. After securing the city, the Afghan national security forces, led by the Afghan national army, attacked very aggressively into Arghandab with the support of our mentors and were able to kill about 80 Taliban and took about 25 prisoners.

Took about two days to fully secure the Arghandab and push the bad guys out or kill them. Again very successful deployment. The icom chatter, the information we were hearing from the bad guys was, they were shocked that the Afghan national army could pursue them that fast and that successfully.

So I think despite the fact that the letdown of the attack on the prison -- (audio break) -- ticked off the sleeping giant there. And the Afghan national army, much to the surprise of the Taliban, deployed quickly, deployed in large numbers and deployed effectively and attacked them effectively and defeated the forces and pushed them out.

They probably were thinking they had some safe haven up in that area for a couple of weeks. Instead it was over in a couple of days. So we were very excited about it.

We were there with them, helping them, doing the planning. We were able to -- they were in the lead. We used their plan, not our plan. We let them lead the attacks, and they did quite well.

You know, there's still a lot of work to be done in developing both sides, the police and the army. But we're seeing a great many successes as we move along. So that's pretty much what I have on the background of that. If there's any questions, I'll be more than happy to answer them or take them on.

MS. CRAGG: Sir, again, thank you for coming to the DOD Bloggers Roundtable. I appreciate that you fit time in your schedule. Today we have eight bloggers on the call. And someone just joined us.

Who was that, please?

Q (Name and affiliation inaudible.)

MS. CRAGG: Okay. We're going to go ahead and start with Jonas. And after Jonas is going to be Chuck Simmins.

So please go ahead, Jonas, with your first question.

Q Colonel, thank you very much for your time.

My question sort of goes to the size of the attack and the possible support. We've probably all seen the old Chuck Norris movies where, you know, one person goes in and is able to do all this. But it really sounds like this was a pretty large operation that would probably require a good deal of support from surrounding communities.

How is NATO working to secure that these communities aren't winning support back from the Taliban?

COL. MCGRATH: Well, the first part: It really wasn't, in my opinion, that large of an attack.

It didn't take much to get a truck in there, rig it with explosives and then blow your way through and then have a couple of fighters to do some shooting.

And, you know, the jail's not like our jails or our prisons. They're pretty much regular buildings. They can be easily opened up and people can be rushed out. So I'm sure they may have known that something might have been going on. I don't know, but I don't give them that much credit for doing some type of commando-style raid. They took advantage of an opportunity and they were successful in it.

As far as the surrounding communities, you know, we have gone through several different programs to train the police up. And I've told the other bloggers on previous interviews as to focused district development, where we're taking the police out and retraining the entire police forces, not only in Kandahar City but for all the other districts in Region South, and that's been working very successfully. And we're also doing that to the west, to the north of the cities and pretty much throughout the region.

So we also have the Afghan National Army that's deployed throughout the area. And so that's how we're trying to secure the outlying regions.

So the -- it's difficult, though. It doesn't take much, you know, to put something like that together and just have people running through the streets in the middle of the night, making a run for it. We were able to track a bunch down in the first couple of hours. We deployed one of the commando battalions from the ANA and they're very successful in killing about 20 Taliban who we think were from the prison because they assembled in a courthouse and shot at them. So they were able to talk attack very quickly.

So we do have a comprehensive plan to secure the city, both on the army and the police side and assistance from coalition and also in the outlying regions.

MS. CRAGG: Okay. Jonas, if that's it -- Chuck, you want to ask a question?

Q Yeah. Sir, Chuck Simmins from America's North Shore Journal. Two questions, one fairly quick and then the other maybe a little bit longer. Were there NATO personnel on-site at the prison at the time of the attack? COL. MCGRATH: No.

Q Okay. To follow up on that, did I hear you say that there was some inside support, that doors were opened or did I misunderstand you?

COL. MCGRATH: It could be -- it's a possibility that there was some type of inside support. We haven't been able to follow up on it. There's no real surprise to that, but we can't be sure. They were able to get out pretty fast, put it that way. But the other side is, like I said, their prisons aren't like our prisons or jails. They're pretty much just edifices with doors and things like that, so if a big explosion comes though, there's a lot of mayhem, they're able to push their way out or -- many are unlocked, what might be a lock or not -- there might even not be locks in there as far as I know, and just make their way -- made a run for it.

Q Okay. Then the district that this operation took place in, what NATO or Afghan security forces were in the district prior to the jailbreak? Were there police already there? Were there any army units already there, or was it --

COL. MCGRATH: No. It's a police -- it's normal police operation. They patrol the streets, like in any other city around the world. There wasn't Army posted outside the prison or anything like that. They have prison guards and things of that nature, but --

Q No, I didn't mean in Kandahar. I meant our -- the district where the fighting occurred.

COL. MCGRATH: Oh, in Arghandab?

Q Arghandab, yeah.

COL. MCGRATH: Yeah, we had Canadian forces up in that area.

Q So there was a security presence. It wasn't that the Taliban had freedom of movement throughout the district.

COL. MCGRATH: The district of Arghandab?

Q Right.

COL. MCGRATH: No, not at the time. I really don't want to get into, you know, troop locations and stuff like that. They did not have freedom of movement, though, in that area.

The stories that were picked up that they were blowing up bridges and laying mines and things like that proved not to be true. They did, as -- they

made their way from the prison, and they also were able to infiltrate from other regions into that area, but it was very shortlived.

Q Thank you, sir.

MS. CRAGG: Thanks, Chuck.

Let's go on and move on. Chris from War and Health, do you want to go ahead with your question?

Q Yes, absolutely. Thanks for taking the time to speak to us.

COL. MCGRATH: You're welcome.

Q My question sort of relates to my topic. Do you have any impressions as to disruptions to humanitarian, MEDCAB (ph), PRT programs since the prison break in the province?

COL. MCGRATH: No. There was no destruction (sic) of any of those. They just left, left the prison and tried to exfiltrate out. They didn't do any damage on the way out. And as far as I know, we did a lot more damage to them in the next couple days than they were able to do to us.

Q Okay, thank you.

MS. CRAGG: Chris, is that it? Any other questions?

Q No, that's it.

MS. CRAGG: Okay. Richard, let's go ahead with you. Marines in the Garden of Eden.

Q Hello, Colonel. How are you this evening?

COL. MCGRATH: Good. How are you?

Q Great. We've heard reports back here after the prison break that there were roughly 1,100 prisoners that got away and 400 of them were Taliban. Assuming those numbers are right, and what you've told us just in the last few minutes, it looks like there's 900 to a thousand of them that are still at large. Is there any ongoing operation that you can tell us about to hunt these people down?

COL. MCGRATH: There was about 900, we think, that got out. There was reports, you know, there were 400 Taliban, 200 Taliban. I'd say it was more probably 200 to 300 that were in there, Taliban. We conducted the operations in the Arghandab, and I told you we killed about 80, took another 25 prisoner, killed another 20 or 30 southwest of the city. But there's ongoing operations -- I can't get into detail -- to continue to fight the Taliban and pursue the Taliban.

Q So you're pretty confident that you got a vast majority of the Taliban in the first 24 to 48 hours that escaped?

COL. MCGRATH: No, I can't speculate. They don't keep very good records at the prison. We haven't been through the training with the prison

yet. That's something -- probably be down the road. It's not on my -- I don't do the prisons over here. So I just don't know, to be honest with you.

Q Thank you.

MS. CRAGG: Richard, do you have any other questions?

Q No, that's it.

MS. CRAGG: Okay. Let's go ahead and move to Christopher Radin of Long War Journal. Christopher?

Q Good morning, sir. It seems to me there are two stories here. One is the prison break, but the second story is the speed and capability of the Afghan national security forces' response to this situation. And I was wondering if you could tell us a little bit about what kind of capabilities the Afghan forces displayed in their response to the situation, either -- I guess from either a command/control point of view or a logistics point of view, that allowed them to respond so quickly.

COL. MCGRATH: Well, I think if you look at it operationally, it was a heck of a movement of forces. Thousands of forces were able to fly in and drive into the region within hours.

Actually, after the prison exploded, there were police and army on the scene within an hour. So that was a good response -- not a good thing to have a good response, but the president and the chief of staff of the army, Bismullah Mohammed (sp) Khan, deployed down here, assisted in planning and the execution of the battle and bringing the forces to bear at the right place, got the troops downtown to re- instill the confidence of the people in the Afghan government -- (confidence down ?) -- they were very visible in what they did. This was a huge success. I don't think they could have done this last year, when I got here, or maybe even six or seven months ago. But in the constant training that we're doing in the train-up, and it shows the flexibility and the agility that they have.

Also logistically, you know, the army -- you know, they're not organized like we are, with huge -- you know, lots of trucks and aircraft and things like that. But they were able to stage the necessary supplies -- ammunition, food, water and things of that nature, and then push that -- classes of supply forward to sustain the forces during the days of the fight.

Although, like I said, the first couple of days were -- I mean, the first few hours were very difficult, not a good thing, I think the response from the government of Afghanistan was tremendous, very positive, very overwhelming, very decisive also.

MS. CRAGG: Chris, there are any other questions?

Q Yeah, just, I'm -- it's a little surprising -- I find this a little surprising, in that there was a GAO report that came out last week that one of their criticisms was the lack of logistics and sustainability in the Afghan forces. So this does not seem to support that conclusion.

COL. MCGRATH: Well, you know, they -- we still have a long way to go with them (log-wise ?) and (C-II-wise ?), especially if we're looking at it through Western eyes. You know, the Afghans have been fighting for an awful

long time. They know how to fight. They're very aggressive, warlike people. And they know the land better than we do, and they know what it takes to sustain it. Would they receive a, you know, a glowing report if they were at our National Training Center or something like that? Probably not. But you know, it's all in the execution. It's all about results. And they got results, so that's how I look at it. And you know, we'll continue to mentor them and train them.

I did not read the GAO report, so I really can't comment on it, but you know, we have to be really careful about gauging, you know, the Afghan army on our standard. We really have to look at the results, and they got the results (here ?) very decisively.

Q Okay. Thank you.

MS. CRAGG: Okay. We have three more bloggers who haven't asked their initial questions. Troy, let's go ahead and go with you. You're number six on the line.

Q Okay, how are you doing, sir? This is Troy Steward, of Bouhammer.com.

COL. MCGRATH: Doing well, thank you. How are you?

Q Good, good. I -- okay, I got three questions for you, sir. I'm going to try to go quick. COL. MCGRATH: Okay.

Q The first one is, are there any intel snippets or any feelings that the prison break could have been a diversion for the village -- Arghandab attack, or do you think the Arghandab attack operation was just a by-product of the prison break?

COL. MCGRATH: I'm not going to discuss intel, but I'll say what I gained out of it is that it was probably a supporting attack for the main attack up in the Arghandab.

Q Okay. All right. Thank you, sir.

COL. MCGRATH: Does that make sense? I'm using some military terms there. Yeah, they would try to draw the forces into Kandahar City and then conduct their main attack in another area. But that obviously didn't work.

Q Right, right. So you felt it was more of a -- or it possibly could be some -- a type of diversion so they could bolster their forces in Arghandab district without much oversight.

COL. MCGRATH: Yeah, it could've. But you know, the Talib been fighting a long time, too. They understand basic tactics. What they didn't realize was how fast these guys could deploy and pursue them. So yeah, that's a possibility. That's -- I've kind of considered it. Didn't work, though.

Q Right, right. The other question I got, second one, is can you talk about any of the challenges or lessons learned in the logistics of supporting and sustaining the surge of Afghan forces into your AO from the other AOs? When you talked about the surge they brought down --

COL. MCGRATH: Yeah, the lessons learned are, you know, we still have a lot of work in setting stockage levels and things like that for the Afghans, for them to understand that and to plan ahead for contingencies and things of that nature. However, they're pretty much a light force and they don't take too much to survive: just some ammo, food, water and things of that nature. But you know, there's few roads in and out. So that has some issues. You've got to look for alternate sources.

We were able to bring in helicopters, Afghan helicopters, and deploy them in support of the operation. That's a first time. I learned some great lessons from that and how we want to integrate them better into the ground forces.

But we pretty much know what they need. And it's a complementary process in understanding about planning ahead and then filling any voids that are in there and always looking down the road so that you can sustain the operations. And so you want to pursue your enemy and to do that you have to be able to sustain and push things forward.

Q All right, sir. Thank you. MS. CRAGG: And just to be fair to the other two bloggers, Troy, I know you have three questions but we only have seven minutes.

Q Okay.

Q I want to make sure Jarred and Mark get their questions.

Jarred, you're number seven. Go ahead.

Q Yes, thanks. I'll pass for --

COL. MCGRATH: You know, we have a lot of time here. We totally weren't restricted to 30 minutes, but go ahead.

MS. CRAGG: Okay.

And then Jarred, you have no questions.

(Names inaudible.)

Q Sure, I mean, you know, the question that I'd really hope to ask, after the obligatory thank-you for taking the time with us, was basically the media impressions of this were that it was a fairly large, well-organized raid on the part of the Taliban.

And the impression I'm getting from listening to you is pretty substantially different. Am I correct in that?

COL. MCGRATH: Yeah, I mean, listen, I'll give them credit. They pulled it off. It was successful. So you know, it's all about the results. And they got what they wanted.

But I don't think it was that big of a success, because we pursued them up into the district and we were able to kill them and capture them and push them out of the district very quickly within a matter of days -- (inaudible) -- weeks or months, which has happened before.

So I don't --

Q Not so much asking about sort of the outcomes as sort of the scale on which they could operate, I mean, to the extent that they had 40 or 50 people as opposed to the extent they had 5 people.

COL. MCGRATH: Yeah, I don't think it was, no. The numbers: I'm not really sure. We'll never know. It could have been that large or that small. But you know, they're walking around the city like you and I. It doesn't take much to burst into a compound and, you know, push the doors open and let some folks out.

You know, someone had written that it was as good as, you know, a ranger-style raid or a commando-style raid. I don't buy that. If it was so good, they would have been able to get away, reconsolidate and attack us and hurt us. But it was the other way around.

So I mean, I have to look at the results also, you know, what they were trying to accomplish. And I don't think they accomplished too much in the bigger picture of things. Q Understood.

COL. MCGRATH: Okay.

MS. CRAGG: Okay. Everyone else might have follow-on questions.

(Name inaudible.)

Q Yeah. Thanks.

Sir, coalition forces have taken a serious hit in the last month in Afghanistan and specifically in the last week-and-a-half in your core area. I'm just kind of curious. If you can, expound on how the troops are holding up. Are the leaders able to take some time to check on the soldiers' well-being and just keep their head in the fight and that kind of thing?

COL. MCGRATH: Well, I can tell you that I'm that leader. I lost 12 soldiers and Marines in these last nine days. And it's been very difficult. It's a very tough blow.

However we've been out to see the soldiers and Marines. I was out there yesterday talking to them, talking to -- I had one major who stayed out there wounded, shrapnel in his arms for two days, refused to leave the battlefield, so that he could take care of his soldiers and make sure they were safe.

Right on the battle scene, he was able to consolidate what happened -- we hit a very large IED, were attacked by RPGs and small arms fire -- organized the defense. And we were able to push the enemy away.

I talked to all his soldiers. You know, they obviously lost, you know, close friends and comrades. And you know, they're mourning. But they want to do their job. They're ready to get back out there and do what they have to do.

The Marine Corps: It's been very aggressive. The 2/7th out in the western districts -- we just had a memorial service for them tonight. They are adamant that they're going to continue forward. Their morale is, you know, they're pressing on.

It's never easy to lose people and take casualties. But we're going on. We're visiting them. I was talking to them. And they're ready to press on. The spirit of, you know, the American fighting man and woman is very strong. And they were able to persevere and go on. And they'll be successful.

Q Thank you, sir. I know it probably wasn't an easy question to answer. We have a lot of families here in New York that, you can imagine, are on edge with everything going on down there. So that means a lot.

COL. MCGRATH: We understand the stress the families are going through. This is very difficult. And it's very heartbreaking, you know, to see this happen. But it is part of war.

You know, I'm really glad we have people like this, men like that, who aren't afraid to go out and serve their nation, even if it means shedding their blood for their nation and dying for their nation. And they go out there every day. And they're fighting aggressively, trying to bring stability to Afghanistan, which will lead to more stability for the region and more stability for the United States.

I'm really proud of them.

I go to the hospital and visit them, and they have resolve. I mean, they're tough as nails. And this is a tough, tough environment. So we understand the families' difficulty back there. We just continue to ask for their prayers and their thoughts so we can press on and defeat the enemy.

Q Thank you, sir.

MS. CRAGG: Sir, we do have a call scheduled for 30 minutes. I should have extended it more. But does anybody else have any other follow-on questions for Colonel McGrath?

Q This is Jonas with the News Herald. I had one. It might be a little complicated and long to answer, though. So I guess if I need to be cut off, I'll understand.

MS. CRAGG: I'm not sure -- I'm sorry to interrupt -- not sure if the call will be just cut off after the 30-minute point, but if here's a follow-up question --

COL. MCGRATH: (Inaudible) -- 30 minutes, doing okay.

MS. CRAGG: Okay, let's just keep on going. And go ahead, Jonas.

Q Okay. Bringing all these troops down into the area, I've been looking at some ethnographic maps, and you're pretty firmly in Ghilzai territory there. The Ghilzai have been kind of the historical agitators in Afghanistan. How are they trying to, I guess -- or how is NATO trying to adjust for, you know, really bringing in a military that's going to include Durrani Pashtun, Uzbeks, Tajiks? I mean, is there any worry that that itself will cause friction?

COL. MCGRATH: Well, that's a good question. Great point. You know, we need more recruits from the south. And the important thing is that we

provide the security down here, which is happening, but it has to be long term. It has to be enduring so that people feel safe to join.

No, I'm not too concerned about any conflicts. We have a lot of different tribes and units working together. (Beep heard.) Whoops, still there?

Q I'm still here. COL. MCGRATH: Oh, okay. I heard something beep. Excuse me.

Yeah, Afghanistan needs to have a national army. They do. The police need to have a national police force. We're working towards that. And, you know, the country needs to come together. Yeah, the south is a tough place. If you're going to win the war, you got to win down here. I think part of that is recruiting a large number of people for the army from this area.

And we have recruiting programs. It's just a matter of time until we get better security in some of the outlying regions so that they can have their sons join up and serve.

Does that answer -- help answer --

Q It definitely did. Is there any concern about the cross-border traffic from Pakistan and the roles that it's played -- might have played in the recent prison attack?

COL. MCGRATH: I don't know if anything from across the border had something to do with the prison attack. But yes, we're very concerned about what's coming across the border and the agitation that they're trying to raise up here.

Q Yes.

COL. MCGRATH: As you know, President Karzai was very concerned about it. He made some comments last week about a few things, what he wanted to do. But there is a problem. It needs to be addressed.

Q Okay. All right. Well, thank you very much.

MS. CRAGG: Thanks, Jonas.

COL. MCGRATH: Okay.

MS. CRAGG: Does anybody have any follow-on questions?

Q This is Chuck. I've got one quick one.

COL. MCGRATH: Sure.

Q Sir, the battle where the major was wounded -- is that the battle that the press release said they estimated that 55 Taliban were killed?

COL. MCGRATH: No. That was the -- we were -- we had an IED hit two days ago, and four of my soldiers were killed. It was really an ambush, actually, and four soldiers were killed. And he was able to, you know, very bravely pull things together, fight off the attack, get the wounded out and evacuate the dead. But no, it wasn't that with the 55.

Q Thank you.

MS. CRAGG: Any other follow-on questions for Colonel McGrath? Any other -- sir, do you want to finish with closing comments? COL. MCGRATH: Sure. Well, I appreciate you guys coming on this morning or tonight -- What time do we have? Twenty-one-thirty? -- here tonight. But I'm more than happy to talk to you all, because you get the word out, and you're telling our story. We're in a -- you know, it's a tough fight. Any time someone's shooting at you, it's very difficult. But we're making a lot of progress here, believe or not, notwithstanding, you knows, the prison break and all that stuff. The army's come an awful long way, and they proved it this week, and we're very proud of them.

The police are coming -- have made incredible leaps and bounds over the last year, in the last six months really, and as we professionalized the police force. I need more mentors. I need more people -- more soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines that come over here and help me train the police and the army. And we're at about 50 percent of our needs. And that'll make things go faster. That'll make things get the Afghan army and police out on their own and able to secure the people.

But I want to let everybody know the soldiers over here, sailors, airmen, Marines, all components -- National Guard, Reserve, active duty -- are great soldiers. They've done one heck of a job. They're very tough, battle-hardened. And they're resolved that they're going to fight their way through this, and we're going to get the capacity up to where it is, and we're going to win. And I've got the right people to do it, the right warfighters to do that.

So thank you very much, and that's all I have tonight.

MS. CRAGG: Thank you, sir, for taking time out of your busy schedule for everyone. Today you've been listening to Colonel Thomas McGrath from Afghanistan Regional Security Integration Command-South. Thank you, sir.

COL. MCGRATH: All right. Thank you.

Q Thank you.

END.